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SUBJECT: Dispute Threatens Future of Vienna Wiesenthal Institute

¶1. (U) Summary: The entire seven-member board of the Vienna Simon Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) resigned in late July in a dispute over access to the archives of Vienna's official Jewish Community. VWI board members assert that the Jewish Community reneged on an earlier promise by imposing onerous conditions that would make it impossible for VWI researchers to conduct their work. Jewish Community leaders say they are committed to reaching a compromise. End Summary.

Red Tape Complicates Access

¶2. (SBU) VWI Board Chairman and political scientist Anton Pelinka told Emboff that he and his fellow board members resigned in frustration over the increasingly complex conditions being imposed by Jewish Community lawyers regarding access to the archives. Pelinka said the red tape reached the point where effective research would not be possible.

¶3. (SBU) Pelinka claimed that Jewish Community President Ariel Muzicant had previously promised simple conditions, similar to the terms of an established agreement between the Jewish Community and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Pelinka doubted that Muzicant was to blame for the complications, noting that Muzicant had backed the VWI initiative from the beginning. He suggested instead that other Jewish Community officials may be trying to undermine the VWI. He said he hoped that the resignation of the entire board would force the Jewish Community to return to the simpler conditions initially promised.

¶4. (U) Muzicant, in a newspaper interview, rejected the board's charges, arguing that it would make little sense for the Jewish Community to block access to the archives after investing so much time and energy into the VWI initiative. Resolution of the dispute will have to wait at least until Muzicant's return from vacation at the end of August.

Background on the Institute and the Archive

¶5. (U) The origins of the VWI project date back to a 2002 initiative by the Jewish Community, independent researchers, and the GOA to establish a major Holocaust research center in Vienna. The late Simon Wiesenthal was personally involved in planning for the VWI, which would be dedicated to the research, documentation and collection of information on anti-Semitism, racism and the Holocaust. Under the plans, the VWI would combine the Simon Wiesenthal Archive, containing some 8,000 files on Nazi crimes and perpetrators, with parts of the Jewish Community archive. Considered to be the largest surviving archive of a Jewish community in the world, the Community archive comprises thousands of administrative files, correspondence and books from three centuries.

¶6. (U) Funded by the Austrian Federal Government, the City of Vienna, and other sources, the VWI started provisional operations at

the beginning of 2009, with full operations scheduled for 2012 after the institute moves to its permanent location, a former palace currently under renovation.

Comment: Strong Motive for Compromise

17. (U) This is not the first time the Jewish Community has become embroiled in a dispute over access to its archives; the General Settlement Fund (providing restitution to Holocaust victims) ran into similar problems in gaining access to the archives for its restitution records. The VWI, a worthy project, is probably not viable without ready access to the archives. Given what is at stake, both parties have a strong interest in reaching a solution.